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ABSTRACT

Current educational research efforts are examining rural/urban differences in achievement, appropriateness of rural/urban achievement measures, effects of parents and community on the attainment of rural students, and how well rural students succeed in higher education. To accurately assess the small, rural school's impact on students, rural-urban comparisons must be made on students who are matched by origin, background, and access to information. Recent composite results find little difference in the academic achievement of rural and urban students or in their desire to attend college. A rural deficit model could be replaced by a rural strength model, for that is suggested by the fact that rural students do wish to attend college and make adequate grades there, notwithstanding the fact that rural high school students have less total access to educational information. It could be argued that rural high school students are therefore, in terms of their overall progress, achieving more, not less. Twelve studies cited and discussed in this digest are listed at the end of the paper. (NEC)

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RURAL EDUCATION

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Rural Student Achievement: Elements for Consideration

By

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RURAL STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: ELEMENTS FOR CONSIDERATION

There is a belief held by many--educators, state board of education members, legislators, the general public--that students from smaller and rural schools receive an inferior education compared to students from larger urban or suburban schools. Until recently, there has been little empirical evidence to challenge that view. Now, however, a growing body of work has begun to examine how well students perform in and after graduation from rural schools. Although the results are far from conclusive, they do suggest that some generally held beliefs about rural student achievement need review, if not revision.

Are There Rural-Urban Differences in Student Achievement?

A comparison of the performance on standardized achievement tests of students from small, usually rural schools with those from larger, often urban institutions has not produced definitive results. Several studies have not found any significant differences between those two groups. In research completed in the state of New York, Monk and Haller (1986) found that students from smaller (often rural) schools achieved as well as students from larger schools. Nor in Alaska did Kleinfeld and others (1985) find that high school size determined the quality of a student's education, experience, or achievement on standardized tests. Moreover, in one New Mexico study, which looked at factors affecting performance of

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selected high school students, those attending schools in rural areas performed as well as those in urban locales (Ward and Murray, 1985).

Other scholars have found, however, that rural-urban differences do exist. One study in Kansas found that the ACT scores for rural students were two points lower than urban students in each of the categories on the ACT (Downey, 1980). Another examination of student performance in Hawaii public schools found sub-standard achievement to be a pattern in rural areas (McCleery, 1979). Other research on achievement in social studies for 13 year olds pointed out that rural students, comparatively speaking, did well on objective tests focusing on skills but not well on objective tests that focused on factual learning (Easton and Ellerbruch, 1985).

Are Rural-Urban Differences Being Appropriately Measured?

The fact that observers, utilizing statistically based instruments, come to quite different conclusions, suggests that rural-urban might be an inappropriate dichotomy. Students in large, urban school settings are, it is generally recognized, a diverse mix. It is not, however, usually recognized that rural students also are far from uniform and include the children of Black sharecroppers, Appalachian mountaineers, Hispanic migrants, reservation American Indians, Kansas wheat farmers, relocated urbanites, and many others. Therefore, unless the origins and life conditions of all students are held constant, no findings of rural-urban difference are meaningful.

There is some indication that what is being measured in rural-urban difference studies is socioeconomic status and/or ethnicity. Easton and Ellerbruch (1985) found that the poorer rural students fared considerably

lower on citizenship and social studies tests than did students from upper socioeconomic urban communities. Another study which held socioeconomic level and ethnicity constant revealed no urban-rural achievement gap (Edington and Martellaro, 1984).

To flesh out rural-urban achievement issues, it is important to consider each group individually, on its own terms, lest a focus on the larger picture obscure complete understanding. For example, Kleinfeld and others (1982) discovered achievement differences between Native Americans in rural village schools and those attending urban boarding schools. Those students who were able to remain with their own tribes and families had a higher success rate than did those operating within the confines of the alien urban milieu.

It is not surprising that students who have less access to diverse reading matter (either through a lack of availability or restricted purchasing power) would not fare as well on standardized tests. But the issue is even more complex, for it appears to be readily assumed that small and large schools have the same curricula. Yet, Barker's 1985 study of high schools has revealed that this is far from the case. The smaller high schools had significantly fewer art, data processing, calculus, psychology, sociology, and advanced placement offerings. Thus, if rural-urban differences were to be found (after backgrounds have been held constant), those might logically be assumed to result not from any factors of desire or ability, but rather from those centered on availability of information. A case in point is Alaska, where after incredible sums of oil money were pumped equilaterally into the schools to make even the smallest technologically modern, students from small and large schools

revealed no achievement disparity (Kleinfeld and Others, 1985).

What Effects Do Parents and Community Have on the Attainment of Rural Students?

When communities are involved in the educational process, that seems to have a positive effect on the achievement of youngsters. This has, however, been difficult to demonstrate empirically (Downey, 1980; Kleinfeld and Others, 1985). One of the negative aspects found in most accounts is that rural communities possess a much more limited view of existing occupational roles for rural youth, who then understandably restrict themselves when going on the job market and on to higher education (Downey, 1980). Brown (1985) attributes this to low family expectations of rural students' career options. Such conclusions are, for the most part, supposition and fail to explain why opportunities presented on television fail to inform and intrigue. Kleinfeld and others (1985) have come to a contrary conclusion, proposing that schools which achieve the best results do exhibit a strong teacher/administration/community partnership and school-community agreement on educational programs. They also have reported that there is a direct relationship between quality education programs and the ability of the staff to work toward an educational partnership with the community. Smaller communities do tend to generate more community support for the school, with it becoming a center for community activity. This, in turn, theoretically provides the students with a greater feeling of belonging to something in which they can participate and thus possess a better self-concept.

How Well Do Rural Students Succeed in Higher Education?

If rural-urban achievement differences are, as some have maintained, significant, then we can reasonably expect that differences would exist in college performance as well, with the rural students being less likely to attend college and to succeed academically and socially. Such assumptions have been quite widespread in educational circles. The rural deficit model, however, does not hold up under analysis. Considerable research indicates that rural students attend college, perform as well there as urban students, and may be as likely to stay in school. As one example, Horn and others (1986), in a study performed in seven North Central States, reported that in 1985 fully 59% of all the 1981, 1983, and 1985 graduates were engaged in some kind of educational pursuit, and 44% were enrolled in a four year college. They also found that lack of social skills is not a factor perceived by rural students as important during their transition from high school to college. Moreover, their collegiate grades are comparable to those of urban students. Both Frese and others (1979) and Downey (1980) found little, if any, difference in academic performance. Downey further stated that rural youth come from an environment which requires active and continuous social involvement and they can therefore fit in quite well in the university community. He also found that where the persistence rate for students of variously sized high schools was compared, size had little effect. One researcher concluded that students from rural areas tend to be a greater dropout risk, but he did not attribute this finding to low grades or social skills. Instead, he focused on family expectations and socioeconomic

status as parameters (Brown, 1985). Even if Brown's statistics are borne out by other observers, the dropout rates must be calculated in a more sophisticated fashion, with breakdowns by student origins and culture. For example, we need to know whether rural Southern Blacks enter and achieve as well in college as their urban counterparts, or whether rural Hispanics, as another example, have lower educational expectations than urban Hispanics. Assuming rural students are more likely to drop out of college, the scholar must then look more concretely at the life experiences of these dropouts, rather than make easy assumptions. Is, for example, a student dropping out because he or she cannot make it at college or because family responsibilities require leaving? Such issues must be addressed so that educators can move beyond a simple pat belief in the rural deficit model.

Summary

The issues surrounding efforts to assess the achievement of rural students (or urban students, for that matter) on standardized tests are by no means simple. The old rural deficit model must, however, be discarded as educators take a new, more objective look at the performance of the many different types of rural students. It is time to dispose of monolithic assumptions about rural America. To really assess the small, rural school's impact on students, comparisons must be made on students who are matched by origin, background, and access to information before any meaningful conclusions about rural achievement can be rendered. Recent composite results prove quite suggestive, however, since many observers have found little difference in the academic achievement of rural and urban students, or in their desire to attend college. A rural

deficit model could quite easily be replaced by a rural strength model, for that is suggested by the fact that rural students do wish to attend college and make adequate grades there, notwithstanding the fact that--if Barker's curriculum comparisons hold up for the nation at large--rural high school students have less total access to educational information. It could be argued that they are therefore, in terms of their overall progress, achieving more, not less. Scholars of the future may well find this, indeed, to be true.

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